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A Fortunate Life...Even in Singapore

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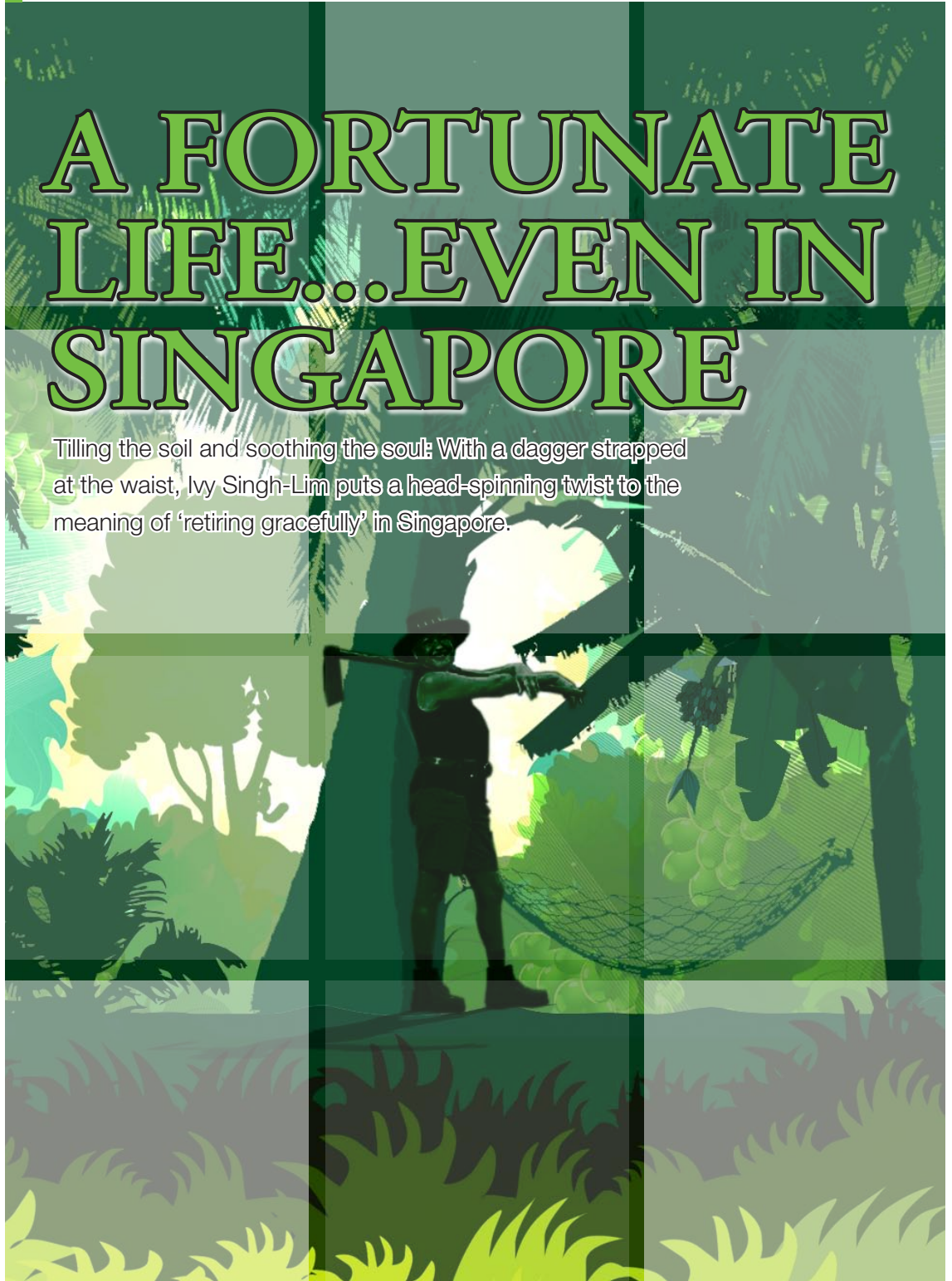
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A FORTUNATE LIFE...EVEN IN SINGAPORE

Tilling the soil and soothing the soul: With a dagger strapped at the waist, Ivy Singh-Lim puts a head-spinning twist to the meaning of 'retiring gracefully' in Singapore.



When my husband Ho Seng and I entered the retirement stage of our lives, we wanted to live on a big piece of land and grow fruit trees and vegetables. That was back in 1999 and Perth in Western Australia seemed to be a 'natural' choice. It was close to home, yet so refreshingly different, with its open spaces, open minds and relaxed atmosphere. Certainly many other Singaporeans think so too, as there are thousands who have already migrated there. So there we were, on our way to 'retiring' in Perth. We were strolling down the endless beach in front of my brother's home when we suddenly looked at each other and asked, "Whatever for?" Ho Seng said: "Beautiful, yes. But who can we share such beauty with? We would be foreigners here. Singapore is our home. Our family and friends are there." We reflected that to be able to live in our own country and eventually die in Singapore was our greatest desire. In the meantime, we wanted to continue living useful lives, not just for ourselves but also for our society. We wanted to be able to build something with which we could do more for the community around us.

Serendipitously, and fortunately before we had taken any irrevocable steps to retire in Perth, I was back in Singapore in 2000 when I chanced upon an article on the 'Green Circle Farm' which was owned by Lim Tian Soo and Evelyn. Until then, I did not know that there were large tracts of land available in Singapore for lease.

It turned out that the Kranji Countryside provided us with the means to realise our great ideal. We loved being 'ulu'¹. To this day, I walk around with a dagger strapped to my waist to protect myself against 'wild things' like the escaped terrorist Mas Selamat²!

But seriously, many people do not realise that a country can only be great if the people love their country enough to want to spend the rest of their lives there and can actually afford to retire and have a great life. It is even more significant if the country's richest people feel that way because they can afford to live anywhere in the world, yet choose to remain in their home country. Home is where the heart is, and our hearts are here in Singapore.

Today, Ho Seng and I have created a beautiful little community out here in the Kranji Countryside. This is our sanctuary. Despite the ear-splitting noises from the Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) aircraft blazing the skies overhead, there are enough breaks in between the flights to give us a real sense of peace. It also gives us the greatest pleasure to see thousands

I wish that many other government departments could have had a similar dose of 'vision' too, instead of choking us with their inflexible rules, regulations and guidelines! It was obviously so much easier for them to say 'no' than to think out of the box and help people like us do something refreshingly different, to start a new trend, to set an example, to find a new life 'on the wild side'.

of visitors thronging the Kranji farms, sharing our love for the vast gardens. Our visitors come from all walks of life and they include pre-school Singaporean children, foreign undergrads, intellectually-challenged Singaporeans, top-guns from large organisations, senior citizens and even young sportsmen and women. Just like 20 years ago, Ho Seng and I did not know we could 'live off the land' in urbanised Singapore, visitors to Kranji are really surprised that there are people who actually want to work our land!

It all seems so simple now but the early years were a great challenge, and the greatest challenge was to change the mindset of narrow-minded bureaucrats whose favourite word was NO! To be fair, the Agricultural and Veterinary Authority (AVA) was delighted with our plans to build a vegetable farm and a one-storey house on it. AVA had sufficient vision to give us waivers from numerous strait-jacketing restrictions, so that we could get 'Bollywood Vegetables' up and running. I wish that many other government departments could have had a similar dose of 'vision' too, instead of choking us with their inflexible rules, regulations and guidelines! It was obviously so much easier for them to say 'no' than to think out of the box and help people like us do something refreshingly different, to start a new trend, to set an example, to find a new life 'on the wild side'.

It was when we decided to offer employment to more Singaporeans that the idea to open up a restaurant at our farm was born. I now give jobs to people who cannot find jobs in normal restaurants. And if I really cannot fit them in, I will resort to placing them in one of the farms around us as I believe that everyone can 'fit in'. Singapore likes to pigeon-hole people. That is so unfair to those who defy classification. I treat my staff like members of my family – something I learnt from my parents.

There are many rich people for whom there can never be 'enough' wealth. They may be rich by the usual standards, but I bet that they are far from happy. This saying is very true – that you are only rich when you know what is enough.

The fact that our patrons are prepared to come out to Kranji for lunch on a weekend – a trip made more difficult, I might add, by the lack of a regular bus service along New Tiew Road (obviously, the people who live and work on these farms do not count enough to have a bus service!) – demonstrates that other Singaporeans like 'living off our land' too, even if only for a fleeting visit.

Thus, we farmers in Kranji were absolutely thrilled with the recent announcement by the government that Singapore is to grow more of its own food. In my capacity as President of the Kranji Countryside, I know farmers who are very worried about the future of their businesses and their families. Now perhaps they can sleep a little easier, knowing they have been given a 'role' in the future of our republic. And for Ho Seng and myself, finally, we have a recognised role in our retirement, rather than be regarded as, at best, eccentrics, and at worse, a burden to the society!

I am constantly asked whether this activity is profitable. Such a Singaporean question! My reply to this would be: What does 'profitable' mean? You might as well ask me if I make 'enough'! What is enough? There are many rich people for whom there can never be 'enough' wealth. They may be rich by the usual standards, but I bet that they are far from happy. This saying is very true – that you are only rich when you know what is enough. I am rich, thanks to my father and the hard work my husband and I have put into our lives, and I have more than enough. So I am not in Kranji to get richer in monetary terms, but to live a truly rich life, especially in my retirement in Singapore, a place where being 'rich' has very limited meaning.

I am even more motivated now to carry on with the vision of creating an entire countryside full of farms growing food productively that can also provide a place where people can come for some solace to ease their weary souls, because in our relentless push for progress and prosperity, we often lose sight of the

Creator and our Conscience. This will never happen to me because my father told me years ago that I am special and I believe it and I live it. I know that one day, Man will realise you cannot eat money and that you need better food for the soul.

To share my good fortune, I would want to start a Women's Working Farm. I want to show them how they can plant bananas and papayas in their HDB gardens (assuming they do not hit brick walls in getting permission from bureaucrats to do this) and teach those who have not obtained the 'three O levels'³ (the kind of criteria that 'allows' them to enrol in a particular course) some kitchen skills so they can make a living from home with their newly acquired culinary skills (again assuming this is allowed) even as they continue to look after their families. Parents are the best teachers to impart to their children values of honesty, integrity, hard work, discipline and responsibility – values which my Indian father imparted to me. There is no reason why less educated people should be denied the same opportunity to cultivate and pass on these values.

Being useful keeps Ho Seng and me young, which is another reason why retiring in Perth was not a good idea at all. Retirement should not mean being put out to pasture. It is the time to build another, useful life of quality. After all, we are special. In our retirement, we are neither parasites nor pests! ♦



Ivy Singh-Lim is a 60-year-old farmer-entrepreneur who was born with an Indian father and a Chinese Singaporean mother – the daughter of a rich land-owning Indian Rajput in Singapore. Her father, who was a Hindu, built the oldest Northern Hindu temple in Chander Road in Singapore and a little Chinese temple in Moonstone Lane. A Christian at heart, the immediate past president of Netball Singapore is known as one of the most vocal and colourful personalities of the Republic and has been rallying support and promoting life in the countryside in Singapore.

¹ Used in the Singaporean colloquial language, the Malay term refers to a rural condition or predisposition that is undeveloped technologically or economically.

² Mas Selamat was, for more than a year, the most wanted fugitive in Singapore and South-East Asia after having escaped Singapore's Internal Security Department's Whitley Road detention centre in 2007.

³ Short form for 'Ordinary Level', a qualification based on the British General Certificate of Education.